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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: BLOGGER'S ARREST MAY DAMPEN SAUDI BLOGOSPHERE

Classified By: DCM Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) According to Saudi media reports January 1, the Saudi Ministry of Interior arrested on December 10 the &dean of Saudi bloggers,8 Fouad Al-Farhan. Reports stated that his arrest was sparked by his blog entry calling for the release of a group of Jeddah men arrested on charges of supporting terrorism. The arrested men's lawyer maintained that these men were political reformers and not supporters of terrorism. The official SAG response was that Al-Farhan was detained for violating rules not related to state security.

¶2. (C) Saudi blogger and author of the English-language "Saudi Jeans" Ahmad Al-Omran told PD officer that the arrest of Al-Farhan, the first of its kind in Saudi Arabia, has left a feeling of uneasiness among Saudi bloggers. Al-Omran said that Saudi authorities, when unhappy with a Saudi journalist, would usually ban the journalist from writing, but not arrest him. He had been thinking of starting an Arabic blog, but with this arrest, has decided to reconsider his decision. Because he writes in English, he believes his blog is below the Interior Ministry,s radar. He noted Al-Farhan,s arrest shows that Saudi authorities now &fear bloggers, because they are free journalists not subject to the government's censorship." This arrest signals to bloggers the red-lines which must not be crossed in their postings. He stated, even though King Abdullah has an &open mind,8 many officials under him fear they may lose power if true reforms, such as complete press freedom, take hold in Saudi Arabia.

¶3. (C) Al-Omran, who has already called for Al-Farhan,s release, is not alone in his fight. In recent postings on his widely-read Saudi Jeans, Al-Omran called on other bloggers and readers to support the release of Al-Farhan. He is a member of a new Facebook group, &Free Fouad,8 which calls for the release of Al-Farhan. The group,s membership increased from about 360 members on December 31 to more than 500 members on January 2, one day after the Arab News and other media outlets ran stories about Al-Farhan,s arrest. Al-Omran hopes an active on-line campaign, similar to that launched for the Al-Qatif girl in November-December 2007, will help get Al-Farhan released. (Note: Al-Omran credits the active international online campaign supporting the Al-Qatif girl to influencing King Abdullah's decision to pardon her. End Note).

¶4. (C) Comment: With Al-Farhan,s arrest, the SAG sent a clear signal to all Saudi bloggers that their postings do not go unnoticed, especially those who write in Arabic under their real names. Such a signal, Al-Omran said, will most likely create an environment of self-censorship of blogs, and inhibit the establishment of new Saudi bloggers. End Comment.  
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